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## Nayborough Grammar

As I turned off the main road into the school car park, I felt sad that I'd never visited the place for anything nice. Lucille had spent seven years at the preparatory school on the same grounds, graduating three years ago to the seniors, but I'd never crossed the gates before, not even to watch her take part in a concert or play, since she refuses to get involved. She only does what she has to and nothing more, never joining the after-school clubs, taking part in performances or trying out for one of the sports teams. Sport is silly, she says. Instead, Lucille spends her spare time at home searching the internet or immersed in a book or, more recently, talking to her mother and Evelyn. I parked, got out of the car and walked towards the grand arched entrance, its Latin motto gleaming above me like a threat.

Nayborough Grammar was very different to the school I taught at, or used to. Here, the affluent paid to have their children groomed for exams, in cold classrooms that were more like factories. Every day the kids were told how lucky they were to be there. My school was more ordinary. I knew these institutions well and recognised the smell from my regular visits when I was young and in better health. I accompanied many school football teams on Saturday mornings to places like this, where we were usually soundly beaten. With all those tests and rules, I never understood how the teachers had the time to make their children so good at sports. I waded through the sea of little uniformed bodies, which shuffled quietly and efficiently between classrooms, and went in search of my little girl.

Eventually I found the headmaster's office. A very solemn secretary lead me in, taking my coat from me and placing it

on a hook in the hallway while I took a sly puff on my inhaler to alleviate the tightness in my chest. It was a large oval room filled with evidence of success. Every space on the mantelpieces and tables was utilised, and the walls were adorned with certificates and medals: 'Head Boy, Nayborough Grammar School, 1958', 'Tennis Champion, Cambridge University, 1961', 'Tennis Runner-Up, 1962', and a black-and-white photograph of a fighter pilot, perhaps the headmaster himself, in pride of place on the desk. There was also a large cabinet of silver trophies. The secretary showed me to a seat at the far end of a space where the headmaster and Lucille waited, him shuffling papers on his desk and her, head bowed, stick legs swinging sulkily, in a massive wooden chair close by. Neither acknowledged me. I sat with hands deep in coat pockets, fingering the morning's letter with a shaking hand.

At over six foot, thick set, with a jet-black thatch of hair combed impeccably back over his skull, the headmaster cut a frightening figure. He was about my age, with the body of an ageing, sagging athlete and a dark, shrivelled face that looked as if it had been too long in the sun. Over his suit he wore a full black robe pleated at the shoulders. A minute or so passed before he spoke, and I wanted to defend Lucille over whatever she'd done, but could say nothing.

The headmaster stood up and leaned over the desk, wiry fingers propping his body up like little buttresses on each side of the desk.

'Mr Stone,' he said in a fierce baritone, 'let us get to the point. This morning, at first break, your granddaughter was caught trying to escape from the school grounds via the back wall, while an innocent boy lay in the first-aid room with blood pouring from a significant knife wound. Reluctantly, he has named Lucille as the perpetrator of this crime, and, when accused, she has not denied it.'

'So she hasn't admitted to anything?'

'She has not denied it, and we are not detectives here, Mr Stone, we are teachers. Children need to learn that if they

can't speak up for themselves, then no one else will. An education is not just about times tables, it's about learning how to conduct yourself. That's why Nayborough Grammar has been at the top of the educational tree for five hundred years.'

I bristled at this but tried to keep quiet, for Lucille.

'And as I'm sure you appreciate, we would be doing your granddaughter a great disservice if we did not punish her severely,' he continued.

Lucille looked up at me briefly but, though I searched her expression for what she wanted me to do, there was nothing in it but contempt.

'But she has a great future!' I cried. 'Don't high marks count for something?'

At this the headmaster raised a hand to stop me, resumed his seat, pondered over his answer for a few seconds, sighed and said:

'Lucille, leave the room.'

The frail little monster sloped off unwillingly and, with her departure, the headmaster became calmer.

'I would like to share your enthusiasm, Mr Stone, but am not absolutely sure if she does have a great future, at least not the way things stand. Let us put today's incident to one side for a minute and look at the wider picture.'

He turned back to the window and gazed out onto the school grounds.

'Undoubtedly, she is a bright girl – her marks are, as you say, often high – but that's not all one needs to be a success. This is by no means the first time Lucille's behaviour has come to my attention. Several teachers have reported her to my office for disrupting classes, and I have noticed her inappropriate behaviour at break time myself more than once. It is not just the number of incidents that is alarming, Mr Stone, it's their nature.'

'What are you talking about?'

'Well, last week – and this is just one example – she complained to her English teacher that what her class was

studying was boringly juvenile. The teacher recommended she buy something by Jane Austen, a fourth-year text. Next day, the teacher concerned found a copy of the book in her pigeonhole with "Jane Austen is unreadable" scrawled in red block letters across the title page. And the week before, despite being the youngest person in the ensemble and only third violin, she suggested to the music teacher that the orchestra should not be playing Glenn Miller! And she called the *Star Wars* theme *rubbish!* Does nobody teach *respect* in your home?'

He waited for a reply, but I couldn't give one.

'Well, obviously not. But we expect more from Nayborough's young ladies. Lucille does not seem to comprehend the importance of fitting in or working as part of a team – she resents the very existence of Games and Home Economics classes – and is generally the opposite of the well-mannered, studious, ambitious young people this school is famed for producing. And on top of all this, violent assault! I have been left with no choice but to suspend her, pending an investigation within the school, though you may choose to withdraw her completely first, saving us all a lot of bad publicity, time, effort and cost.'

The headmaster checked himself, readjusted his cloak and briefly changed tone.

'I fully understand how difficult it must be for Lucille . . . losing her mother so tragically to cancer at such a young age – my own mother suffered the same fate – but we all suffer, Mr Stone, we all suffer. It's no excuse. And such a tragedy makes the support and discipline a father provides more essential, not less. I don't know where he had to be so urgently this morning . . .'

'Actually, he's going through a . . .'

'I don't care really, but I recommend that, if you can find him, you discuss what arrangements you wish to make as soon as possible. If that is what you choose, there will be plenty of schools in the locality happy to take Lucille, though perhaps her father may prefer to send her to a psychiatrist

first, one of his colleagues perhaps. Until the matter is settled, it would be unwise for her to attend school. Keep a close eye on her at home, for your own safety.'

I thought of Lucille waiting for us in the corridor, no more than a pile of girlish bones, neither trouble nor danger to anyone in her fourteen short years, until today at least.

'Will the boy be all right?'

'Eventually the boy in question is expected to make a full recovery, though he will not be able to write in his examinations in May and will be a great loss to the rugby team this season. I doubt there is another prop forward as talented in the whole school.'

He pondered this for a moment, perhaps considering possible replacement prop forwards, and then dismissed it. A smirk appeared on his rubbery face, packing the spare folds of skin together at the ears.

'One girl does not a great institution make, Mr Stone. I think that is all.'

And with that, he made to open the door for me, but, overtaken with anger, I blocked his exit, doing my utmost to pull myself up to his height – chin to the skies, cheeks red.

'Is that all you have to say? Then I must find the answer to some questions of my own.'

I opened the door.

'LUCILLE,' I barked, shocking her into swift movement, 'come back inside and sit down this instant.'

The headmaster, shaken too, sat down.

'Mr Stone, this is most unorthodox. I'm going to have to ask you to . . .'

His hand reached towards a bell push.

'Summon your secretary if you wish. I won't mind.'

Lucille arrived, hovering by the door, petrified. The headmaster folded his arms and there was a silence, a hush no one was prepared to break. Lucille's eyes stayed pinned to the floor, the headmaster's remained fixed on me, burning with indignation, and both waited for me to speak. With another

rush of adrenalin, every courtroom drama I had ever seen came back to me and I became someone else, someone courageous and clever. I breathed deeply, and made the room mine.

'I must say, sir, that your story does not add up. I think you are using this as a convenient excuse to get rid of exactly the kind of girl your precious institution should be treasuring. I have three decades of teaching experience myself and recognise an untrue story when I hear one, whether from a child or a teacher. Let us summarise the facts. Tell me again: you questioned Lucille thoroughly about what happened?'

'Mr Stone, you should save your eloquence for a worthier cause. If you insist, I will repeat what I said, slowly. Lucille will not answer the charge and we are not here to draw information from her that she is unwilling to provide.'

Lucille could see me shaking, I was sure. And Evelyn and Nathan and Arabella, even Lucille's mother, all of them shaking their heads. I trembled, overcompensating for nervousness with volume.

'So she neither denies nor admits anything!' I boomed. 'Has the boy said why she did it?'

'He says they were having a purely verbal difference of opinion. He was joking, and she lost her temper and attacked him.'

'Joking about what? Do small fourteen-year-old girls carrying knives lash out in this way at every kind of joke by a rugby-playing athlete? Have you even established who the knife belonged to?'

'She refuses to say. He also refuses to say and is too ill to be pressed on the matter. Children often argue about silly things, as you seem to have forgotten. And this incident, which you are turning into a fiasco, has culminated with a real victim.'

I pressed on.

'You have said this took place during a break time, yes?'

I looked at Lucille, and she nodded.

'Surely there were other pupils present. What do they say? Or are they dumb as well?'

The headmaster stood up and slammed both fists, clenched, onto his desk.

'They refuse or claim not to have seen. There is such a thing, Mr Stone, as *esprit de corps*! Your granddaughter – as I was trying to subtly explain to you without her being present – is generally unpopular because she has no sense of it.'

I approached the other side of his desk, leant over it and shouted.

'Until now! From what you tell me, a conspiracy of silence surrounds this crime, a conspiracy involving all the children present, Lucille included. But since you tell me Lucille is an outsider in your school, and since I know she has always been well-behaved at home, perhaps there is a chance she was being bullied in a jocular way she could not share. Did that boy call you names, Lucille?'

I asked the question while still facing the headmaster.

'Yes,' came a squeak from behind me, after a short delay.

'Dirty names?'

More silence. I turned round to see her legs bunched up in the chair, face hidden in her lap.

'One was, but I didn't know what it meant.'

'Then how did you know it was dirty?' asked the headmaster suavely.

'Because of the dirty way he said it.'

The headmaster shrugged, looked back at me with raised eyebrows and a crooked smile.

'TELL US THAT WORD!' I ordered, but she kept an obstinate silence. Why would she not help herself? My mind took a flying leap.

'Was it YID?'

And for the first time, she looked straight at me, startled. I grabbed her and was out of the room before I could think.

'You can stuff your Nayborough ladies up your arse!' I screamed, unsure quite what I meant but already on my way

out, snatching my coat from the hook. As we walked away my nose began to bleed hard, staining the front of my shirt.

'It wasn't "Yid",' said Lucille, yanking my arm. 'He called me a leper.'

On returning from the nearest toilet, tissues stuffed up both nostrils, I found Lucille in the corridor, holding hands and talking in whispers to a slight ginger boy of similar age wearing thick glasses and holding a brown briefcase. Neither headmaster nor secretary were anywhere to be seen. When I approached Lucille she turned from the boy without a goodbye and ran towards me as if she had been alone, and we walked to the car without a word. At the thought of Lucille keeping a prop out of the rugby team for a whole season, I threw an arm around her, smiling. She wasn't talking, but clung to me tight and that was enough. Once safely in the car, she ripped her tie off.

'Woo hoo! I'm free!'

Lucille tossed the tie around her head like a lasso.

I borrowed Lucille's phone and called Henry, arranging to meet him as soon as possible in a nearby restaurant; he's the one adult I know who can be relied on, and there's nothing he loves more than a good, meaty drama. Usually he paid for our meals together anyway, but today he would have to.